

## THE CONVERTED ESTATE CAR AMBULANCES

An insight into the adaption of normal production line Estate cars into a commercial use as Ambulances is a very limited subject, in that although this was a common practice in Europe and North America it was a very limited exercise in the UK.

Not much description is known of the European Fords and Mercedes, they are shown as seen at the 1994 National Ambulance rally at Lincoln, however it is a different story regarding the 1968 Pontiac Superior.

Prior to restoration it had been taken direct from service after 27 years use where it operated for most of that time for the City of Lewiston, Montana, where it provided cover for a modest City population as well as the rugged rural area adjacent to a National Park.

This vehicle truly characterises the American Ambulance of the 50s and 60s. Its style is clearly that of a hearse, the reason being that until the early 70s, when the paramedic services commenced and Federal Government started to specify the van type of ambulance, all these vehicles were traditionally supplied by the makers of funeral cars and while many Cities and populated areas were covered and operated in conjunction with Fire Services, in rural areas the tradition was that undertakers ran ambulance services, their vehicles understandably often serving a dual role.

It has always been a tendency in the United Kingdom to convert larger lightweight Commercials in the 1 - 2 ton range, two firms best known for this were notably Appleyard of Leeds and Wadham Stringer of Waterlooville, Hampshire, who built specialist bodies on mainly the Morris LC and LD chassis and other builders favoured chassis by Bedford, Commer, Dennis, Daimler etc all because of the extra headroom these vehicles offered, which were much more suitable for walk in access and as most patient journeys were then of a short local nature, the sacrifice of speed and comfort by using such vehicles did not cause concern.

However in the late 50s and early 60s, in response to demand for faster and more comfortable dual purpose patient transfer vehicles, Martin Walter Ltd of Folkestone and Friary Motors of Basingstoke embarked on a program to convert normal production line Vauxhall Estate vehicles for such use.

The vehicle chosen in 1957 to 1962 by Friary Motors was the 2.6 litre, 6 cyl OHV, Vauxhall Cresta PA which could achieve 95.6BHP at 4,500 rpm and could reach speeds of 90 MPH.

The cost price was £1.308 for the basic 2.6 litre, with vacuum servo assisted brakes, some beast, regrettably none seem to have survived!

Martin Walters initial project seems to be the Vauxhall Victor FB Estate.

The thinking at the time was, that such a vehicle with its ability to being quickly changed from recumbent patient transport to a normal estate, capable of transporting 4 passengers and associated luggage and equipment, with speed and comfort at low running cost, would be of great interest to country Doctors, Police, even Fire services.

Another possible marketing opportunity were Convalescent homes and Industrial services in remote areas, it also turned out that there was a potential export market, the Order of Jerusalem and the Red Crescent who between them bought about 100 of the FB's.

A few FBs did see service in the UK with the NCB and again in very small numbers they saw service with the Hospital services at Hastings, Bolton, Portsmouth, Nottingham and Newcastle and perhaps any reader directly associated with Martin Walter Ltd during that period can throw more light on the subject but I am not aware of any FB Ambulance vehicles that survived into preservation.

The Vauxhall FB estate ambulance however does retain its place in our vehicle history however, because it has being modelled as part of the Dinky Toy range (model No: 278) and can still be found in the model form at to swap meets.

Martin Walter Ltd must have seen a future for continuing the concept as in 1965 they promoted the radical and new Vauxhall Victor FC 101 conversion, which because of its up rated new design incorporating curved sides giving extra internal space it was a natural progression from the FB variant. Specification text on publicity material issued in 1965.

#### **Vauxhall Victor 101 estate car AMBULANCE. – original description**

- BODY - based on the Vauxhall Victor 101 Estate Car. The body is left intact with the addition of fibre glass trunking on the roof for the provision of stowage for collapsible stretcher, blankets, splints, first aid box and any other items of equipment thought necessary. The forward end of the trunking has an AMBULANCE SIGN.
- BODY INTERIOR AND FITTING vehicle has individual front seats and split rear bench seat. Stretcher is situated on the near side of the vehicle, stretcher gear is Martin Walter type with folding loading tray.
- Additional equipment as required can be fitted at extra cost and can include resuscitator, thermos bottle, saline drip bottle, two way radio etc.
- Seats and body trim are to the standard Vauxhall specification.
- SEATING ARRANGEMENTS - with the Martin Walter stretcher gear and the inclusion of collapsible stretcher. When the stretcher is not in use and stowed in roof trunking there is seating for 6 persons. When the stretcher is in use there is seating for driver and for an attendant alongside patient.
- WINDOWS - normal estate car windows.
- PAINTING - standard Vauxhall colours are included in the price. Painting to customer's own requirements can be fully effected at extra cost.
- MECHANICAL SPECIFICATION - as given by Vauxhall Motors for the Vauxhall Victor 101 Estate Car with standard options.
- OVERALL MEASUREMENTS - wheel base:- 100 inches. Overall length:- 174.7 inches. Overall width:- 64.7 inches. Overall height including fibre glass roof trunking but exclusive of any beacon or other protusion:- 65 inches.

PRICES - conversion price £168.

Basic Vauxhall Victor Estate Car, including individual front seats: £665. Total of £833.

De Luxe Victor Estate Car, including individual front seats: £725. Total £893.

DORMOBILE WORKS, FOLKESTONE, ENGLAND. EST 1773. Telephone: Folkestone 51844.

Fortunately one of these Victor 101 FC roof pod vehicles does survive in my ownership and the Nottinghamshire Ambulance Preservation team has also recently rebuilt a normal estate version into a non pod sitting case vehicle and added that to the preserved fleet of Ambulances they rally.

I am fortunate that RBH 540D came with a complete history attached and is still in original condition, the specification being as published by them in a promotional flyer of 1965.

#### **VAUXHALL VICTOR 101 FCG Super De Luxe. AMBULANCE CONVERSION.**

Manufactured 1965. Registered 1966 - Aylesbury, Bucks.

Chassis No: FCG 6187602. Engine No: FC 30126248.

This vehicle was ordered by SLOUGH INDUSTRIAL HEALTH SERVICE to replace an old Ford E83W utility type van with a folding stretcher in the back - very basic.

The supplying agents were Bridge service Garage, Thames Side, Windsor. The supply docket is dated July 5th 1966 (*supply docket from garage enclosed, item 12*) at the list price of £665 plus purchase tax of £139.2.1

An exterior mirror (drivers side only) was fitted as an extra for £1.5.0., monogrammed Vauxhall chrome plated safety belts at £4.19.6 each and split front seats at £12 were also incorporated .

The conversion from Estate to Ambulance was by MARTIN WALTER Ltd of Folkestone and it is fitted with a removable stretcher for front line use OR with rear split seats raised it can still be used as a full Estate sitting case vehicle.

The stretcher as fitted now is not the standard Furley telescopic one, as specified by Martin Walter Ltd, which when folded could be put away in the pod, but at some time it has been upgraded to a more modern wheeled type, with quick release patient straps incorporated- manufactured by FERNO of Wilmington, Ohio, USA, which is not foldable and storable in the pod and this leaves the roof pod free to carry the extra equipment specific to the requirements of the site where this vehicle was deployed.

As RBH 540D was commissioned for use on the, then, largest UK Industrial Estate in operation at Slough - a complex covering 800 acres with its own power station, internal railway network, own health and fire service - the vehicle had a requirement to also carry a wrap around canvas stretcher, ropes and a full set of wooden splints (all still on board) to enable rescue of casualties from rooftops and high structures and to then transport them, in comfort and speed to hospital - both at the accident site and at the hospital the wheeled stretcher is far more practical in use than one which has to be carried everywhere.

It is possible that the vehicle was resprayed at the time of the conversion as trying to colour match the white indicates that it is not the original Vauxhall Grecian white which was the manufacturers colour of that date.

Its overall excellent condition with little or no signs of rust is due to the fact that the vehicle had been properly rust proofed at the beginning of its life and when in service has been stored in a heated garage, a further full underside rust proofing exercise was completed in 1996 and a stainless steel exhaust manufactured and fitted.

It was in service until 1988 and had only covered 20,000 miles in local running during that time. It is so original that the "1,000 mile running in sticker", the "Triplex toughened glass" sticker and the "high compression" sticker - put on the inside of the screen on the production line - are all still intact.

When offered for sale it was bought by Mr A Wickens, a vehicle collector, who due to his other commitments, was not able to rally it but kept the vehicle dry stored, annually MOTd, shown on occasion at the Knowle Hill Steam rally at Maidenhead and I acquired it from him in 1996.

In 1988 when sold by the Slough Industrial Health Service (by then renamed The Slough Occupational Health Service) the management ordered the removal of its livery, however the current Company (since renamed to Corporate Health Ltd) have kindly consented to my restoring the 1966 livery and this has been done.

THE VEHICLE HAS NOT BEEN RESTORED, ONLY CLEANED UP and some slight modifications to upgrade the safety considerations and to meet modern road needs, this includes modification to the engine to allow the use of un-leaded petrol, the fitting of a Kenlow thermostatically controlled cooling fan on the front of the radiator to avoid overheating if caught in stationary traffic (not a requirement I had to consider when it ran on leaded petrol why ?) and changing the old dynamo for a modern alternator.

I rally all over the country, have completed all the Commercial road runs at least once, where the vehicle has won many cups and trophies.

I support Hospital charities, open days and the 999 rallies where possible. It is a vehicle which attracts much attention, and many small children associate it with "Ghostbusters" !

It has a 3 speed column change, is a lovely vehicle to drive and being the Super De-luxe variant (photographs of drivers area shows deluxe standard of interior with coil front suspension) the ride is superb.

Specification when new was for a max speed of 85 MPH - some lorries were still restricted to 30 at that time - the engine is the high compression 4 cylinder 1,598 cc version and cruising at a steady 55 MPH

the vehicle has a range of 225 miles and does about 30 MPG.

In 1998 I attended the Luton Festival of Transport and on that day took the Ambulance back to its place of origin and displayed it outside the Vauxhall Museum, where as everywhere else it is recognised for what it is, a uniquely rare example of a little known part of our vehicle heritage and as such is always a topic of discussion wherever it is displayed.

The initial high cost of such individual vehicles was primarily why so few were bought, most conventional ambulances being mass produced tended to be more affordable, especially where fleet purchases were concerned.

The Estate conversions could not be matched for comfort, speed and lower running costs but the cost of the original purchase of the vehicle plus the conversion costs of from £100 to £300 on top could not always be justified for the stretcher variant, however many ordinary Estates were liveried and run as sitting case vehicles and thus not incurring the costs of fitting stretchers etc.

In the 1960s MORRIS also marketed the OXFORD conversion by Appleyard of Leeds.

VAUXHALL however seemed to have cornered this small market with the Martin Walter FB variant, very few FCs, unless being ordinary Estates used just for sitting cases, were bought.

Many other small vehicles were offered by Manufacturers at that time but did not seem to have many takers.

AUSTIN offered a MAXI conversion and their PRINCESS modified by Appleyard of Leeds.

From the ROOTES stable, Hillman offered variants based on the MINX, HAWK and Super SNIPE Estates.

FORD offered their 3 litre GRANADA S RAPIDE conversion done by Coleman-Milne and the CORTINA converted by Hartford Motors (Oxford) Ltd..

In the 1970s, Wadham Stringer of Waterlooville, Hampshire, continued the practice and converted 8 Austin 3 litre saloons (*see SLIDE item 23*) and these were all given ORH (Portsmouth) registrations. No information is available as to where they went for service.

Other specialist conversions of light commercial chassis vehicles were done by Wadhams at that time and included Range rovers, Austin Gypsies for West Sussex C C and Chevrolet vehicles for some Health Authorities including vehicles for export but these seem more akin to full size ambulances rather than the the Estate car ! (*see SLIDES 24,25,26*).

In 1976 N-A-M specialist vehicles of Newton Abbot in Devon, offered the FORD GRANADA and CONSUL versions but although the above seems to be quite an extensive list of suppliers, the take up on sales were more of individual sales for Industrial premises, factories and private nursing homes etc but when one considers the potential expanding ambulance market at the time, it was miniscule.

Coming up to date and the scene has changed dramatically as one now sees many such conversions - mainly in use as fast response vehicles - regrettably however most seem to be of foreign manufacture, not surprising I suppose as Europe saw the benefit of such vehicles years ago and have stole a march over others with regards to production and marketing but if ones interest is in the modern Ambulance fleets then joining the British Ambulance Society is recommended.

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#### **History of RBH 540D since my acquisition in 1996.**

This vehicle is not restored but as an indication to others that even if a vehicle is in the superb condition as this one was, due to its age and having regard to the fact that such things as rubber do not last for ever, much work still has to be undertaken for peace of mind and safety.

Work done on vehicle since acquisition, routine ongoing maintenance and some remedial safety items to date.

18 April 96. Chassis and body checked, some remedial welding to main structure underneath done and also to spare wheel well. Brakes adjusted. New front flexible brake hoses fitted.

1 May 96. MOT completed.

4 May 96. Taxed and insured for 1 year. Front and rear bumpers, light units etc removed,

cleaned and either greased or repainted as required. All wheels removed, cleaned, repainted etc and replaced. Tyres (including new spare) checked etc.

9 May 96. New battery fitted. Fuel tank removed all fuel lines and tank cleaned. Carburettor stripped and replaced. New filter put in fuel line by tank.

29 May 96. Brakes. New front wheel cylinders and shoes fitted.

10 June 96. Livery replaced.

16 July 96. Ignition. New ignition leads, distributor cap, rotor arm, points and condensor fitted.

30 July 96. Underside professionally steam cleaned, rust cleaned off, new rust proofing and stone chipping put on. All interior panels, doors etc Waxoiled. New rubber door to window seals fitted on all four doors.

25 Sep 96. No drug stickers applied to windows.

28 Sep 96. Replacement nearside mirror fitted.

27 Oct 96. Water: Radiator removed and sent away for reconditioning. While out all front end grills, lights etc removed and cleaned, greased etc. Panelling inside cleaned and re sprayed with black hammerite. New top and bottom hoses fitted. Thermostat removed and cleaned and replaced. New hoses to heater fitted. Engine flushed out. Reconditioned Radiator fitted. System antifreezed. Battery box cleaned and repainted.

3 Sep 96: completed the HCVS Bournemouth to Bath run.

27 Oct 96. Windscreen checked for chips and polished.

31 Oct 96. Insurance policy amended with value agreed as £10,000. Electrical items: Bell, blue lamp, bumper spotlight and roof searchlight removed, cleaned and replaced. Rear centre extra brake light unit fitted inside rear window. Winter preparations undertaken - all chrome covered in vaseline etc.

Throughout the winter period, regular small trips made to keep brakes and clutch free.

16 Mar 97: Stainless steel exhaust fitted.

23 Mar 97: All wheels removed, cleaned, painted etc.

27 Mar 97: Sump removed pump screen etc cleaned - new sump gasket fitted oil changed. Brakes tested on rollers. New inner and outer speedo cable fitted. M. O. T. OK.

28 Mar 97: Battery isolator fitted. Fog light wired in. Rear searchlight re-wired in. New windscreen washer pump and tubing fitted.

29 Mar 97: New wheel embelishers fitted - correct pattern.

21 Apr 97: Comprehensive insurance renewed.

1 May 97: Vehicle taxed.

4 May 97: Completed HCVS London - Brighton run.

1 June 97: Completed HCVS Tyne Tees run.

15 June 97: Visited Vauxhall Museum at Luton with vehicle.

25 June 97: Completed HCVS Ridgeway run (Oxford to Newbury).

1 Aug 97 Completed HCVS Trans pennine run.

3 Sep 97: Completed HCVS Bournemouth to Bath run.

7 Oct 97: Intermediate action wiper unit fitted.

30 Oct 97: Winter preparations completed.

Throughout winter regular small trips made to keep brakes and clutch free.

1 Apr 98. Thoroughly cleaned, all chrome polished etc.

15 Apr 98: M.O.T etc. OK.

1 May 98: Comprehensive insurance renewed. Tax renewed.

8 Sep 98: 2 new road horns fitted.

1 Nov 98: Winter preparations completed.

Throughout the winter, regular small trips made to keep brakes and clutch free.

20 Feb 99: ALTERNATOR: Due to all the extra electrical items this vehicle has fitted for use as an ambulance, at times the system can get overloaded, especially in wet weather when wipers, lights, heater etc are all on at once and the dynamo struggles to cope, so for practical purposes the vehicle is now converted to negative earth and alternator fitted, all electrical items needing changing done.. New radio

fitted. New set of 2 tones fitted.

22 Feb 99: Cylinder head removed and Datum engineering services converted for lead free petrol by replacing valve seats with hardened ones.

1 Mar 99: Cyl head with hardened valve seats fitted. New water pump fitted. New temperature sensor fitted.

26 Mar 99: M.O.T.

1 May 99 Insurance renewed and Taxed.

3 May 99: Completed HCVS London to Brighton run.

5 May 99: Moved to new home at Knypersley. Put in new home - proper garage.

16 Sep 99: Brakes, check made and rear brake shoes replaced.

1 Aug 99; Completed HCVS Trans pennine run.

15 Aug 99: Astle steam rally - very heavy rain.

10 Sep 99: went back to Black Park and completed breaking of old Estate - collected all remaining spares.

1 Oct 99: Winter check completed - engine run up at least once a fortnight and vehicle moved every so often to keep clutch free.

10 Apr 2000. New front to rear main brake pipe fitted, oil changed. M.O.T. OK.

30 Apr 00: Cheshire road run - 157 miles round trip.

1 May 00: Cancelled Gawsworth hall - no tax.

2 May 00: Insurance renewed and taxed. Vehicle jacked up, tyres blackened and checked for stones etc - underside paintwork cleaned and touched up - roof pitting cleaned out, rubbed down and sprayed etc.

3 June 00: Cancelled Tyne tees run - Mary ill.

5 June 00: With Jack went to the Charnock Richard meet - wrong night - she overheated in traffic jam.

25 June 00: Astle Park - 1,000 engine rally - Sun only.

27 June 00: KENLOW fan fitted in front of radiator -thermostatically controlled and set at 200 degrees. (no more overheating ).

15.July 00: Attended Fleetwood tram day trams on strike, a lovely weekend. Home via Preston - hot evening, lots of slow traffic - no sign of any overheating.

21.July 00: Went to Thornes Park rally at Wakefield. 144 miles return trip - bit disappointing.

6 Aug 00: Trentham gardens car rally. OK.

12 Aug 00: Astle Park steam day - weather OK - enjoyed it.

27 Aug 00: Buxton Steam Fair, Hartington Moor. Small, not much there.

3 Sept 00: Astle Park car rally, on Vauxhall stand. Nice day.

8 Sept 00: Went to Kendall torchlight procession. 200 mile round trip. Very slow - TOO SLOW - engine did not overheat but lost electric circuits for: BELL, FOG, SPOT, Blue light, RADIO and car horns, will not go again.

18 Sept 00: Electrician in to sort out problems. New ball for bell ordered from Richard.

21 Sept 00: Went to Bassetts yard at Trentham, N Midlands meet.

30 Sept 00: Ball for bell recd from Richard.

15 Oct 00: Went on the N West road run from Leyland, via Carnforth to gisburn. Lovely day out - good pub lunch. Sent report of run to VCV.

Throughout the winter, regular small runs made to keep brakes and clutch free.

16 Feb 01: New points and condensor fitted.

1 April 02. Insurance changed from EON to NFU still agreed value of £10,000.

14 Apr 02. MOT etc.

Most rallies cancelled due to Foot and Mouth controls.

June - on way to Charnock Richard meeting - engine started to run rough - sorted out by RAC with magic carb cleaner.

Only did a few local runs for the rest of the year and during winter but engine not running correctly - suspected un leaded fuel separating.

26 Mar 02. MOT. All fuel system out and cleaned - new carb fitted, new plugs etc.

30 Mar 02. thoroughly cleaned and polished, road tested etc.

Started to use Millers additive - octane booster and lead additive

21 Apr 02. Sandbach festival of Transport.

28 Apr 02. Cheshire run. Good trial run of 120 miles.

29 Apr 02. New battery fitted, new points.

5 May 02. London to Brighton HCVS run. 480 miles @ 31 mpg.

2002 only local running for the rest of the year.

May, new rear UJ fitted.

July. new distributor cap and plug leads fitted.

Sept 26. All hubs off - brakes fully checked and hand brake adjusted.

Wax oiled u/neath.

Greased throughout.

Levels of sump/gearbox/rear axle checked.

Regular small trips to keep brakes and clutch free.

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